

**THE CAPTIVITY OF THE BIBLE IN SOUTH AFRICA:
TOWARD A PASTORALLY CONCERNED BIBLICAL
HERMENEUTICS.**

by

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PREFACE

This thesis was born out of my experience and reflections as a parish priest in the Anglican parishes of Bonteheuvel (the Church of the Resurrection), Elsies River (St Nicholas) and Hanover Park (St Dominic's) where I served as a priest, my theological training at St Paul's, Grahamstown, my academic studies in the Department of Religious Studies at the university of Cape Town, as well as my experiences as a part-time lecturer in the Department of Biblical Studies at the University of the Western Cape and as an Anglican Chaplain at the same university.

My heartfelt thanks to all those who have inspired me through their academic excellence, and others, through their commitment to the Christian tradition. Above all, the key position occupied by the Bible has been a striking feature. I did however discover through my engagement in Bible study programmes in the abovementioned parishes, the amazing ability of people to receive a critical analysis and to appropriate it for themselves. People were open to new ideas and I gradually realized that liberation is not something which can be won on behalf of others but it is a process through which and into which people grow.

The Bible with all its richness and various liberation traditions has so much to offer and yet we so often put it into the captivity of unfair expectations when we expect from it answers to questions which we have locked up in our own experiences.

This brought me to understand through study and reflection, that that experience needs to be unravelled first and by ourselves.

I have been positively influenced by the excellent Biblical scholarship of two of my lecturers, Dr I J Mosala and Dr L W Mazamisa who was also my supervisor. My thanks to them and many others who shared with me in discussion and particularly Bishop Charles Albertyn who first encouraged me to take on further academic studies.

I also want to extend my thanks to Ms Sharon Ogilvie whose typing skills I appreciate and who was very patient in dealing with the original script and to Mr Jerome Cornelissen of the Department of Biblical Studies at the University of the Western Cape for his invaluable contribution in proofreading the text.

Finally, thanks to my immediate family, my mother who inspired me tremendously and for the patience and support of my wife Glenda and children Ryan and Esté.

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my father, Edward Stanley Sampson without whose faith in God and belief in me, none of this would have come true.

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ABSTRACT

Various contemporary Liberation methodologies of Biblical interpretation have generally failed to find a firm enough footage amongst communities of the oppressed. This is so, in spite of the fact that these methodologies are born out of the struggles for liberation of these communities.

Most of the people who have a relationship with the Bible, are quite ignorant concerning the human element in the production of the Bible. This ignorance, amongst others, results in a subservient and uncritical approach to the Bible. This is essentially the issue that this thesis wants to address.

Chapter one deals with the human origins of both the Old and New Testaments. This is followed by a chapter on methodologies of biblical interpretation. Both in essence seek to highlight and celebrate our humanity by highlighting the human element in our understanding of the Bible. Chapter two also deals with the question of what constitutes a sacred text.

Chapter three is a critical reflection on existing Liberation theologies and particularly looks at Liberation theology in Latin America, Black and Prophetic theology in South Africa and Feminist theology. The perception of the Bible which are influenced by these theologies are used in developing a hermeneutical starting point which does not regard the Bible as the absolute and ultimate Word of God, but as a source in the Christian tradition.

Chapter four is an attempt to show how the ethos of a denomination influences the way in which people understand the Bible. It is then argued that it is impossible for anybody to follow the Bible literally because of the ways in which various factors such as socio-political, economic, psychological and tradition influence our interpretation of what is read in the Bible. Furthermore, people do not in reality accept the Bible as the absolute Word of God although most seem to claim that it is and Biblical scholars and theologians have this as their hermeneutical starting point.

Given these arguments, people do have a special relationship with the Bible and it is a meaningful religious symbol to many who find solace, comfort and direction in it. The Bible must be seen in the context of the community of faith and therefore it must be studied in that context. Any hermeneutics must take the needs and limitations of these communities seriously as Biblical scholars are challenged to be sensitive about the faith of the people for whom the Bible remains a holy and inspirational source, especially if they are victims of oppression.

The concluding section challenges Bible study facilitators to question their own hermeneutics in the light of the evidences of this thesis and to see the empowerment of the oppressed as a priority in the presentation of the Bible. This is the underlying issue of importance throughout the thesis, i.e., how the Bible can be appropriated by communities of the oppressed who adhere to the Christian faith, in the struggle for liberation and transformation.

THE ISSUE TO BE ADDRESSED

Biblical criticism and interpretation is not a neutral activity in the struggle between the oppressors in their effort to maintain the status quo and the oppressed in their efforts to radically disturb the status quo. This is so, because, in South Africa the status quo represents the disorder of Apartheid¹ and, therefore, any activity which allows the status quo a longer life, allows Apartheid and oppression a longer life. People help to maintain the status quo either through conscious activity or by ignorance, political naivety or a weak social analysis. The latter support for the status quo is therefore subconscious and more excusable, but the effect it has on the victims of the system is no less devastating.

Biblical scholars have been challenged by many to take sides in this struggle and some have worked tirelessly to develop methods of biblical interpretation which will aid the struggle of the oppressed to radically disturb the status quo in South Africa.

These Biblical scholars have argued with conviction and clear intellectual prowess that experience plays a key role in biblical interpretation. Furthermore, they have stated that all biblical interpretation and methodology is informed by historical, social and economic processes. They have also eloquently made us aware of the fact that Biblical scholars, like everybody else, reflect

their class interests in their methodology. The issue, therefore, is the development of a hermeneutics of the oppressed in South Africa and particularly the Black community as economic exploitation in South Africa is inextricably linked to racism.

For all these wonderful contributions, the fundamental question is still the ability (or inability) of Christian communities of the oppressed to receive and accept a critical approach to the Bible.

This is the issue of importance in this thesis: the experience of those sectors of the oppressed who adhere to the Christian tradition in South Africa, provides the fertile ground in which any methodology of biblical interpretation, which will assist the struggle to radically disturb the status quo, will blossom and grow.

Beyond this experience lies the challenge to encourage the acceptance of a methodology which is radically different from the standard of neutrality set by the oppressors, the colonisers and the racists. The control of the oppressor over the mass media makes it easier to propagate its standards to the oppressed. In this way, the Bible is portrayed as being beyond criticism and not providing any possibility of questioning the status quo, as order is portrayed as an unquestionable Christian virtue. The complication of a disorderly status quo is not raised.²

Christians in South Africa are over-exposed to State-interpreted-Christianity.

We have to add to this the social function of religion in a community which has no access to more expensive forms of social activity. The sociological function of religion is pronounced in communities of the oppressed where leadership potential is often stifled due to the anti-potential-developing educational programmes for Blacks in South Africa. The Church provides an arena of competition for leadership and social upward mobility.

Church activities therefore become much more than theological matters. The Sunday morning service or Eucharist or Holy Communion becomes much more than an activity with a profound theological meaning. It is also subconsciously an opportunity to engage in activity which is not work or struggle-for-survival in the home and family.

Religion is therefore a deeply and highly emotive issue, particularly in the communities of the oppressed, for here it is not only sustenance as regards personhood, but it is a much-needed social outlet and therefore it, and its symbols, will more likely be guarded quite ferociously.

It is in this category which the Bible falls and it is this reality which makes it very difficult to project a critical or scientific approach to biblical interpretation. The Bible is a very important and emotive symbol in Christianity as it is interpreted in the communities of the oppressed.

It means as much to those who cannot read and simply clutch the Bible in the lonely room of an old-age home when fear and rejection dominate, as it means to those who simply open it and read the first verse that catches the eye and finds some kind of solace there.

Biblical scholars need also to take this into consideration. The experience of the oppressed is of utmost importance but the Bible as a site of struggle can only be fully appreciated if the inherently, yet understandable dependence of the Christian sectors of the oppressed on the Bible as a religious symbol, is taken into account.

It is my contention that much more painstaking time needs to be offered to the critical issues surrounding the Bible instead of only those contained in the Bible. Issues of interpretation and method, exegesis and hermeneutics should become part of Bible study programmes and these should be put simply and gently in order to overturn the oppressive relationship that many people have with the Bible. This latter problem has made of the Bible an unfair, stubborn and dominating tyrant by imposing on people certain values, norms, standards and morals which increase their oppression. For these have rendered people incapable and unwilling to question, challenge and overthrow the forces of oppression.

We will therefore see how methodology in fact already suggests that there is no one pure meaning of the Bible, as many people

often naively like to believe. This is a naivety which has been induced by many generations of religious subservience and fear of a wrathful God. This is the heritage that needs to be analyzed and redefined.

We will also examine the human origins of the Bible as represented by the forces operative in the formation of the canon. This will be followed by an attempt to examine the issues surrounding methodology and the way in which the Bible is interpreted in communities of the oppressed. The concluding section will deal with the role of tradition in biblical interpretation.

CHAPTER 1

1. THE ORIGINS OF THE BIBLE

The formation of the Canon of Scripture in both the Old and New Testament is an integral part of the Bible. The reality of our situation in the Christian Church in South Africa, is that very few Christians are aware of these actual origins. This attempt to work on the implications of the processes which brought about the finalizing of the Christian Scriptures, is meant to highlight the magnificence of the Bible. It is my contention, that the arguments which warn against a focus on the human element in the formation of our Scriptures in fact underestimate the people who value the Bible for its inspirational value. That position can almost be seen as a leftover of the 'ignorance is the mother of faith' era in the Christian church. We cannot use our own shortcomings and omissions of the past as an argument to maintain that situation.

People need to be given the opportunity to grow into a fuller appreciation of the process which resulted in our Scriptures. They have the right and deserve the privilege, to be educated concerning the class and power dynamics which governed the society which produced the Bible, so that they can more fully identify the class and power dynamics which govern their own lives. The portrayal of the Bible as a classless document which

stands above the ordinary dynamics which control human life in community, is unfair towards the Bible. It furthermore provides an escape from the demand to understand our own situation and to encounter God there. People need to be made aware that oppression is not simply a God-ordained state, but a situation brought about by the domination of one group over another and that the forces of oppression are always well organized. This is crucial in highlighting the need for the oppressed to work hard in organizing their own forces in its opposition to oppression.

In the publication, God's Project,³ Carlos Mesters makes the point that the first book produced by God is the world and our experiences and that the Bible is the second. I believe that in giving people the freedom to discover the human element in the formation of the Bible, we will give them the freedom to discover the presence of God, and their own worth in seeking an understanding of their own human conditions. This is of particular importance to those oppressed who regard the Bible as sacred in their struggle to counter the well-organised orchestrations of the oppressor.

In our study of the Canon of Scripture, we will discover the human element and, amongst other things, learn the lesson of assertive and organised action and how, in the case of the canon, it has resulted in such a meaningful and holy possession for millions of Christians across the world. This is a position with which the oppressed in South Africa can easily identify, as

the Bible remains a revered book in the homes of a large percentage of the oppressed.

The quest to bring order in people's religious observance can be regarded as a major reason for the formation of a set measuring rod by which the religious lives of people can be checked. The reality is, however, that the standards of society are set by those who are most powerful and those who control the means of production and possess the necessary skills and resources to dominate the thoughts and lives of other people. Such standards will therefore necessarily reflect the interests of those who set them, the formation of the Bible should not be regarded as an exception. If an exception is made, the reverence that people have for the Bible will obviously lead them to unquestionably accept the position held by those persons who had the greatest say in the process which led up to the Bible as we know it today.

1.1 THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

Gottwald,⁴ in The Hebrew Bible, posits that the printed copies of the Hebrew Bible as we know it today is "... the end product of a complex literary process reaching over more than three thousand years." He argues that this literary history can be seen in three phases which sometimes overlap. He identifies these as:

1. "the formation of the separate literary units";
2. "the final formation of the Hebrew Bible"; and
3. "the presentation and transmission of the Hebrew Bible".

FORMATION

The first phase is marked by the need to understand that the contributors or writers did not write in the understanding that their writings would form part of a book which would eventually provide the authoritative basis for the life of faith of a community. However, as this community responded to particular needs and situations which faced it, a corpus of literature developed. This body of literature grew out of their distinctive religion. During this phase, there was no written literary measuring rod.

It is therefore particularly through the activity of believers and adherents to the religion, that these separate literary units were produced. It was through their commitment to their faith and their struggle to make their faith relevant to the issues which challenged the community of Israel, that the process which resulted in the Bible, was given impetus.

T R Henn⁵ makes the point that we need to accept that the literature of the Bible is far removed from our own literature. He states that the literature of the Bible is "... a literature of simplification and simplicity." He means hereby that people wrote out of their experience in thoughts and feelings, as dictated to by their own particular situations.

A further issue raised by Henn, is that one is dealing with a narrative of a highly selective nature.⁶ Agriculture and war

dominated their lives and this is reflected in the writings and the imagery that is used further underpins this point. It was therefore the outstanding and heroic actions which got the greatest coverage.

Reflected in all of the above, Israel was never itself a society with no class division if one takes into account the existence of a peasantry and a strong organised landowning fraternity. Therefore, while these writings and reflections are assigned to Israel, one wants to draw attention to the sector in Israelite society which most likely produced the literary units referred to by Gottwald. I J Mosala addresses this issues when he writes about

"...a struggle between the God of the Israelite landless peasants and subdued slaves and the God of the Israelite royal, noble, landlord and priestly classes"⁷

He concludes that:

"... the Bible is rent apart by the antagonistic struggles of the warring classes of Israelite society as our life is torn asunder by the class division of our society."⁸

These struggles therefore provide the context in which the literary units, referred to by Gottwald, were produced.

As these separate literary units were gradually linked one to another, a corpus of literature, which began to take on sacred meaning, started developing. In this way, books as we know them today, developed through a process of addition, as smaller

sections were put together and formed larger entities.⁹

Gottwald furthermore draws attention to the key role played by the oral tradition in the formation of the Hebrew Bible. He argues that our modern day orientation to book knowledge imparts our judgment concerning the crucial role of the spoken word in the putting together of a literary text.¹⁰ The literary text is therefore much more complex than simply an individual's perceptions. It includes the thoughts and ideas of a community in communication. This is significant, insofar that the spoken word cuts across class and privilege boundaries and reflects the thoughts of a cross-section of the community, although it is still sifted through the ideological framework of the author.

The characteristic structures of the oral forms do, however, reflect the broader ethos of a community and therefore underline the importance of the contribution of the individual members of a community or society. What we value as scripture, are the reflections of a community, the expression of the narratives explaining religious belief, hymns and thanksgiving of national victories, laments expressing sadness, laws, priestly regulations, prophetic sayings and aphorisms or artistic proverbs.¹¹

The overall scenario, however, remains the portrayal of human activity in speech and communication. It is precisely the putting together, through human effort, of these expressions of feelings and emotions which I believe is important as we examine

the importance of the human factor in the formation of our Holy Book. It is of greater importance as we seek to bring the communities of the oppressed to a more dialogical relationship with the Bible, instead of allowing the present oppressive relationship to dominate their lives.

FINAL FORMATION

The second phase is what Gottwald calls the final formation of the Hebrew Bible whereby collecting and sifting, by exclusion and inclusion, brought us the three sections viz. the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. This process was eventually endowed with a specific sanction by the community as authoritative for the community. The books together evolved as sacred literature.¹²

The Law or Torah came to provide for Israel a token of continuity between the era of Moses and the era after the exile. This was of fundamental importance in helping them cope as a community within the Persian Empire. They had undergone fundamental changes and needed to affirm an own identity. They wrestled with their identity in relation to what they were before the exile¹³. The Torah was a key feature in this process. Gottwald writes:

"An effective way to define and solidify the restored community was to stress its religious continuity with Moses, the lawgiver, and with the patriarchs, judges, kings, priests, and prophets and preexilic and exilic Israel."¹⁴

The needs of the community played a crucial and determining role

in the process which eventually gave sacred meaning to these ancestral writings that survived the testing period of Israel's exile. They needed to respond to the situation whereby they were granted cultural and religious freedom within the persian Empire and they needed to affirm the core of their beliefs and identity. This need, therefore, gave rise to the sanctity of the literature.

After the crystallization of the Torah, the literature of the prophets was seen as a necessary follow-up. In a time when prophecy had begun to wane due to the fact that the national life of Israel was severely restricted in Palestine, these prophetic writings provided a necessary substitute. The contributions of the prophets were then placed in the order in which we find them in the Hebrew Bible according to specific criteria, ranging from the length, to the dating of the work.

B J Roberts¹⁵ argues that the prophetic writings were meant to be read in conjunction with the reciting of the Torah when people met together in the official times of Temple worship. The reason being that these writings had liturgical and ritualistic significance. The community of faith however felt that both were important in terms of their messages and general contribution. This is of particular importance because of a transition from prophecy to apocalypse. Roberts states that..

"It was then high time that prophecy, a most important part of the divine revelation, should be declared inviolable and sacred,..."¹⁶

The third section of the Old Testament canon encompassed psalms, hymns and songs. During this time, the Pharisees were in control and they decided on what was sacred and what needed to be excluded from the canon¹⁷. They had the last word as to what would be regarded as part of the Writings and as this section concluded the final formation of the Hebrew Bible, they finally decided on what would ultimately be known as the Hebrew Bible.

Again, one is aware of how the power dynamics of the time influenced what would be regarded as sacred. The insight and determination to decide on matters relating to their faith, enabled the final formation of the sacred text of the Rabbinic Jewish community. In the same way, people's determination to wrestle with the issues of the day in our own age, ultimately determines the shape of that faith. If the final decisions are left to the powerful and these go ahead unchallenged, then the desires and hopes of the oppressed will remain unfulfilled in matters of faith.

PRESERVATION AND TRANSMISSION

This phase is marked by the handing down of written sections after the text had taken on a more permanent form. This is also the phase marked by translation in order to make it more accessible to a broader constituency.

Throughout this phase, people within the community of faith, actively participated in making the Hebrew Bible a companion to

more people. These people, however, also projected their own interests as they interpreted the text and endeavoured to discover its meaning. This process has not come to an end and marks the battle about what the Hebrew Bible and the whole Bible says to whom and in which way. Ultimately it is about whose interests are served. If the oppressed are to appropriate the Bible in their movement to liberation, they need to be brought alongside the Bible instead of remaining in subservience to it, and the interests of those who decided upon its final form.

1.2 THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

The final formation of the New Testament Canon was the result of a long process generally marked by its beginnings in the first century, its formation in the second century and its closing in the fourth century.¹⁸

This section of the thesis will not attempt to be a study of the historical data involved in the development of the New Testament canon, but will seek to establish the dynamics surrounding that development. The issue would be to highlight the way in which the ordinary struggles of a community in its attempts to make sense of its existence, and ensure its survival, resulted in a document which is as treasured as the Bible. Our purpose is to enable us to reemphasize and thereby to learn to appreciate and hallow the demands made upon us in order to understand our own situation and conditions in our search to take control of our own destiny.

The way in which certain names dominate the history of the development of the canon, is an indication as to the influence individuals had on what was considered to be the standard. These same dynamics are at play today. The struggle is about who determines what those standards are and whose interest are served. This is the challenge to the oppressed communities, to ensure that the standards are determined by those with whom Jesus associated so closely. This is also the challenge to Biblical scholars, to ensure that the voice of the oppressed is heard and that their interests are served.

William R Farmer¹⁹ identifies three broad factors which influenced the way in which the New Testament canon was shaped. The first, he argues, is the circumstances surrounding the persecution of Christians and the resultant martyrdom. This situation demanded of the Church to encourage and strengthen its members in matters of faith and discipline.

The second factor was the emergence of a diversity of systems of Christian theology. Opposition to its persecutors could best be affected by doctrinal unity and solidarity of belief. The diversity caused a fragmented opposition and response to state persecution and this needed to be addressed. Thirdly, there was the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman empire when Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity.²⁰

The persecution of the Christian church gave rise to strategic planning and a special emphasis on developing a firm core of belief. This demanded the further setting of high standards which would enable individual Christians to continue in their commitment in the face of many demands to let go. The reality was that the church was engaged in a struggle for survival.

Moule states:

"Active hostility to the Christian Church is a matter which is clearly relevant to our enquiry into the circumstances which led to the formation of the New Testament, for the attacks of opponents gave rise to certain types of document embodying defence or counter-attack,...²¹"

The primary quest in the Christian religion at this stage was to establish control over its adherents and for this an accepted and identifiable authority was needed²². The relatively small group of adherents needed authority from which they made their claims. This authority would be the basis for exercising control over the believers, particularly as they faced the real possibility of persecution and martyrdom.

This struggle must, however, not only be seen as a struggle between one homogenous Christian group and its persecutors, but also as a struggle for the maintenance of the interests of those who were in power in the Church at that particular time. The way in which the names of scholars are attached to different forms of the canon at different phases of its development, is sufficient evidence of this.

There were lists of books associated with Athanasius (296-373) and Amphilochus (d. 394) who both heavily influenced the view of the Chalcedonian churches. This is further backed up by the documentation of Eusebius (d.340). Yet even before this, there were the influential attempts and efforts of Clement (150-c.215), Origen (185-254) and Hippolytus (d.235) who were noted scholars, from a particular class in society.²³

The interplay of the canonical status of the Epistle to the Hebrews is another example of the level at which the decisions concerning canonicity were made as Origen engaged in struggle with Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Gaius of Rome, Cyprian and Novation of Rome²⁴. The issues which I believe are of importance to today's reader of the Bible, are to understand these dynamics and the struggle for criteria, particularly bearing in mind the silent voices in the development of the canon.

The New Testament, like the Old, had its genesis in the activity of speech rather than in the written word. The written word was a result of the need to make available to others that which was kept by oral tradition, concerning the community's life of faith. The issues involved and the biases displayed in this process are well-known and proven facts to Biblical scholars. Somewhere along the line, these written texts began to take on sacred meaning and grew beyond ordinary and normal scrutiny by readers.

Brevard S Childs is one of the main protagonists of canonical

criticism and he regards interpretation as beginning with the canonical form of the text²⁵. For him the canonical form is the major issue and he points that:

"The canonical form marks not only the place from which exegesis begins, but also it marks the place at which exegesis ends. " ²⁶

According to Gottwald, Childs refers too scantily to the social factors which influenced the shaping of the canon.²⁷ Gottwald sees social scientific criticism as the critical issue in the formation of the canon, whereas Childs regards canonization itself as 'the ultimate religious act in the literary mode'²⁸, Gottwald regards the social matrix as the ultimate deciding factor regarding canonization.²⁹

The role played by the social life of people is therefore regarded as critical and suggests that what is needed is for us to understand the social conditions as much as biblical scholars study literary forms and historical data surrounding the text. Gottwald warns against methodological fundamentalism which seeks to exclude one or the other, but the important point raised by his criticism, is that a thorough understanding of the social locus is crucial in understanding the making and shaping of the Bible. In the same way, the social locus of the receptor needs to be analytically known in the interpretation of the text.

1.3 THE CANON AND THE OPPRESSED

The issue raises questions relating to the status of the Bible in Christianity. The Bible is regarded as the 'Word of God' or at least, inspired by God. The forces which brought about the Bible are therefore seen, at the very least, to have harmonised under divine guidance, to bring about our Holy Scriptures. Belief in the Bible as the Word of God has varying degrees. This is evident in the different approaches that Christians display towards it.

Fundamentally I believe that the distance between Biblical scholars and ordinary readers or users of the Bible is exacebated by the different starting points. Whereas Biblical scholars enter the arena of biblical interpretation with all the knowledge of the process which brought about the Scriptures, and the way in which human activity is understood to have been inspired in order to produce sacred scriptures, ordinary readers of the Bible do not have this knowledge.

It is always a serious problem if people only focus on the end product without any awareness of the process. This makes critical evaluation extremely difficult. This situation is further aggravated if the end product is as revered and hallowed as the Bible, particularly as the Bible plays such a critical role in the lives of many Christians in the communities of the

oppressed. Here there is very little evidence of a dialogical relationship, there is mostly subservience. The tragedy, if one is dealing with a community which needs all its resources to overcome oppression and mental domination, is that people will settle for short-cut soothings which do not change or challenge the forces which determine oppression. Uncritical readers who are oppressed, also place themselves in subservience to the baggage of a society and communities which no longer exist, if their relationship with the Bible (as ancient literature) is allowed to remain uncritical.

Bible study courses are opportunities to enable the oppressed, who have been deprived of an educational system which enables critical analysis, to develop such methods. This lack of critical analysis perpetuates the situation of oppression. There is a great need to allow people in the oppressed communities to identify the human activity in the process and development of our Holy Scriptures. They need to appreciate their own efforts in the unfolding of God's divine course for their present situation, just as it was when the Bible came into being.

People have the capacity to reach the point where they will understand that the written Scriptures are as much the result of people's awareness (in speech and written word in a different era, awareness of the dynamics in the society which influenced their lives - and by critical reflection - understand what God meant to them and what their faith could enable them to achieve.

There was dialogue between them and their context just as today, there must be that same dialogue and, added to that, dialogue with the Bible. This three-way dialogue is necessary because of the critical role that the Bible plays in the lives of many Christians in the communities of the oppressed and it will bring about a consciousness to determine the forces of history and to effect change.

The issue is therefore the empowering of the oppressed in South Africa and the Bible is a crucial part of our lives.

CHAPTER 2

2. THE BIBLE: METHODOLOGY AND INTERPRETATION

The interpretation of Scripture has been described as the principal bond between the ongoing life and thought of the Church and the documents which contain its earliest tradition³⁰. This process has been part of the life and existence of the Bible for as long as there were people who lived in a close relationship to it. Interpretation was however never a neutral concept.

Although all people who read the Bible interpret it in their own particular way, biblical interpretation, as a field of study, has been dominated by the ruling and privileged classes because of their access to the resources which were regarded as necessary in order to engage in such scholarly activity. This is the arena of battle between Biblical scholars, who reflect the interests of the oppressors, and those who have been actively developing hermeneutical methods that would serve the interests of the oppressed.

This paper wants to go beyond this particular battle, by finding ways in which these hermeneutical methods can be brought closer to the communities of the oppressed and how it can encourage them in their struggle to transform society. We therefore need to make a distinction between biblical scholarship as a scientific discipline and biblical interpretation as a process engaged in

by all people who have any contact with the Bible, either by reading, or by being supported by it for its symbolic value. Biblical interpretation ranges from fundamentalism right across the spectrum to a materialist reading of scripture.

These interpretations are determined by factors including situation, culture and socio-political setting in a given time and place. There are also personal factors which influence the way in which people relate to the Bible. The primary purpose of this paper remains the search for the empowering of the oppressed and the development of critical analysis and how this applies to the Bible. It is an attempt to reach a level of dialogue that will give them a sense of worth and power. As Paulo Freire writes:

"Critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed at whatever stage their struggle for liberation has reached."³¹

A study of methodology in biblical interpretation will show how in fact the quest for absolute truth in biblical interpretation is misdirected and how people in varying degrees do not regard the Bible as the absolute Word of God because contexts and the blinkers which it produces makes such a position impossible. The most we can do, is to understand our own situation in such a way that our relationship with the Bible contributes to the necessity of the transformation of our society.

The problems which encounter the interpreter of the Bible become more pronounced when we identify the key phases and methods in

the interpretation of Scriptures. We will therefore make a study of the Historical Critical, the Structuralist and the Social Scientific methods.

2.1 A CRITICAL SURVEY OF METHODS OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

The Historical Critical method is regarded as a proven one by its protagonists. What is meant by this method, is the interpretation of the Scriptures within the context of the history of the community which produced it, also therefore taking seriously other documents of the time.

The purpose of historical criticism is to understand a text by reconstructing the historical situation in which it was produced. The positive contributions made by this method have been hailed by many scholars, but so have the shortcomings.

This was truly a critical breakthrough in giving credence to the importance of highlighting the reality of a living community with its own dynamics in the production of a text regarded as being as sacred as the Bible. It does, however, treat the community as a homogenous unit and therefore does not reflect the internal struggles of the situation.

Too much also depends on hypotheses and presuppositions because of limited data. The data which is obtainable, is a reflection of outward "facts" and does not regard the 'inner psychic reality'.³² It does not reflect the spirit of a community.

There is furthermore no emphasis on the reader or receptor as a fundamental factor in the text. In the light of debates concerning the relevance of the Bible, it fails because of an overemphasis on the past, lacking in the link which the receptor or reader draws with the present and future.³³ Mazamisa makes the point in the following way:

"...sign and signification are not identical. The meaning (signification) which a text acquires in the receptor is partly influenced by a number of factors, implicit and explicit. These factors tend to intrude into one's understanding of the text; for example, the social location, or the purpose and expectation of the receptor."³⁴

This is a crucial contribution which represents a new paradigm especially since the issue concerning the relevance of the Bible has become a pressing question in South African society today.

Structuralist analysis, as a method, has highlighted the importance of language. It is concerned about the point of departure as well as the goal and the actual result of the message. The point of departure relates directly to the assumption that there is a structure in every way in which language is expressed. This method seeks to study the text as an object. It treats the text as if it has an intention of itself. In his criticism of Daniel Patte, one of the key protagonists of structural analysis, Mazamisa summarizes the criticism of this method in the following way:

"Structural analysis does not regard social, historical, and religious backgrounds as constituent of text 'formation'".³⁵

This method has been criticised for reifying the text. It fails to prioritize language as a means of communication. Whereas the Historical Critical Method is an example of the reification of, history, Structural analysis, in its attempt to place greater focus on language, has reified language.

A text can never be seen as so autonomous that it ignores the necessity of historical knowledge pertaining to the creation of and issues surrounding the text. It needs to acknowledge the reality that texts do not originate in a vacuum. The situation which influenced the author of the text is largely ignored. This had brought about strong fundamentalist tendencies, and the analysis of structures as a primarily academic exercise. It does not demand that socio-political issues be taken seriously.³⁶

The strengths of these methods together with their shortcomings, gave rise to the development of a new way of interpreting the Bible. Contextual theology introduced into Biblical interpretation the importance of experience. Jean Luis Segundo³⁷ refers to the hermeneutical circle, whereby the role of experience in the life of the interpreter, is seriously taken into account.

The interpretation of the Bible is as much influenced by the context and situation of the interpreter as it is influenced by

the historical realities surrounding the text, as well as by the language structure of the text itself. The context of the interpreter and/or reader is therefore of critical importance. It therefore becomes imperative for the interpreter to engage the forces which influence his/her life. These forces may be social, economic, political, psychological or any aspect which influences the life and perspective of a person.

Such a contextual approach to biblical interpretation may obviously lead to a situation where the Bible could mean everything that anybody wants it to mean. This can in reality be seen as an observation of what is already taking place. People, consciously or subconsciously, read the Bible through the spectacles of their own reality. This is why racists, fascists, colonialists and imperialists have quoted from it to support their view, while guerillas, revolutionaries, socialists and radicals have also been able to support theirs.

Ultimately, our ideological framework determines the way in which we interpret the Bible.³⁸ The racists in South Africa, and the radicals, have all quoted from the Bible in order to encourage their diverse opinions and each side has sought to declare their diverse opinions. Each side has sought to declare the evil in the other. What appears to take place at this level, is that the struggle is waged primarily on a political level and the political position of either side determines the way in which the Bible is interpreted. Itumeleng Mosala³⁹ points out that the Bible itself reflects the same struggles and this is what enables

people at opposite sides of the struggle to find a supportive position in it.

The issue, however, is more than this, as two people from different ideological perspectives do in fact interpret the same text differently. A good example would be the controversy surrounding Romans 13 and its demand to be loyal to the state⁴⁰. Mosala would argue that that is exactly the intention of the text and that it reflects the class interest of its producer.

At question in the whole scenario concerning methods of biblical interpretation is that those who apply the various methods are quite ruthless in their analysis, whether it is reconstructing the historical setting, whether it is scrutinizing the text or whether it is taking into account the class interests of the reader and author. It is done in the interest of seeking to determine what the Bible is seeking to say. The major hermeneutical question is how to get back to the text. The text itself, is an interpreted and translated piece of material as the original text is very often completely lost.

The matter of importance here, is that these different approaches invariably refute an uncritical approach to the Bible. Historical critics and structural analysts have particularly found themselves in the predicament of merciless scrutiny on the one hand and humble subservience on the other in relation to the texts of the Bible. In reality, they too, acknowledge the human element in the production of the text. The reality is that this

aspect lies hidden from the ordinary reader who adopts the attitude of humble subservience without sufficient understanding of the human element and therefore they fail to share in the way in which our humanity is celebrated, if we see it active in the production of our holy symbols, like the Bible.

The ordinary reader, particularly those in the communities of the oppressed, here again, need to come to grips with the dynamics involved in our understanding of the biblical messages, as the Bible does portray different messages and not just one. The people who value the Bible need to be given the opportunity to understand and value the whole Bible and particularly the process and dynamics surrounding it. In an era where the oppressed are in a process of liberation, they need to be helped to develop critical faculties, not only towards the Bible, but towards life itself. One reason for people's unhealthy subservience towards the Bible is because they place it above scrutiny due to ignorance concerning its origins and various legitimate critical approaches to it.

If we are to take seriously the need for transformation in our society and the concomitant empowerment of the people to effect this transformation, then biblical interpretation can be a starting point for Christians. If people are enabled to be transformed in their relationship towards the Bible through careful and considerate exposure, then they would have been placed well on their way towards a fuller participation in that process of transformation.

The methods of biblical interpretation provide exciting ways of reading the Bible. The truth of the matter is that because of ignorance concerning the issues and dynamics surrounding the Bible, many of its ordinary readers have maintained an unquestioning and uncritical approach. For all the contributions made by many biblical scholars, the ordinary reader has been stuck with a confessional method of biblical interpretation.

The question is particularly complicated because of the relationship produced by the confessional method and people do regard the Bible with great awe and holiness. This issue needs to be seriously taken into account as the Bible is to many in the communities of the oppressed in South Africa a source of great inspiration especially due to the vicious effects of the system of Apartheid. For them the Bible remains much more than just another human production and Biblical scholars, from whatever persuasion, need to take this into account. This point is particularly important if the Bible as a pastoring measure is realized. What needs to be addressed therefore, is the nature of sacredness regarding religious texts and in particular the Bible, as regards our concern in this thesis.

2.2 SACREDNESS AND THE BIBLICAL TEXT

It appears as if many Biblical scholars have failed to take the attitude of the ordinary reader to the biblical text seriously enough. This has particularly been the failure of Black theology

in South Africa. Whether biblical methods are regarded as liberatory or not, must surely be determined by its effectiveness to take root amongst the oppressed. Its efficacy can only be determined by its contribution towards the process of transformation in society, communities of the oppressed and individuals. We cannot continuously hail the Bible as liberatory if the oppressed remain in an oppressive relation to it. The reality of sacredness in the minds of the oppressed can therefore not be ignored.

Robert Detweiler makes the point that

"...believing readers of a sacred text encounter it with an aggressively 'faithful' attitude."⁴¹

This is also true for the communities who need to learn to appropriate the interpretational tools which will enable the Bible to become a serious force in the struggle for liberation.

One of the reasons why liberatory methods of biblical interpretation have not sufficiently filtered into the minds of ordinary readers, must be because of the different ways the text is regarded by Biblical scholars who determine the methods, and the readers, for whom the methods are intended. How do we get the ordinary reader to read the Bible in its context, from our own context, without detracting from its importance in the Christian faith and in the lives of those who find solace, comfort, direction and encouragement in it.

This is the pastoral side of biblical hermeneutics that needs to be taken into account. It is a pastoral demand which must essentially determine the avenues through which a liberatory biblical hermeneutics must reach the communities of the oppressed. This does not mean that people must be left to absolutize the Bible when the human element is the bottom line in its formation.

Readers of a sacred text feel constrained when they interpret that text,⁴² as they understand a sacred text to mean only what its divine message is all about. It is therefore inevitable that people will in this sense believe that there is a true and pure meaning in the text. One cannot neglect to say that what is regarded as sacred in one community of faith may be regarded as secular in another. In many instances, Biblical scholars do not give enough attention to the fact that they are dealing with literature which is regarded as sacred and beyond scrutiny by those who use it. We use the word 'use' advisedly as the Bible is used for its symbolic value as a means of security and encouragement.

At the same time, people of different religious persuasions spend much energy and effort in proving the fallibility of the sacred books of other religions while holding out their own as the undisputed message of the Divine author. In this way, Christians have dismissed the Koran and Muslims have dismissed the Bible. Detweiler, in his article attempts to determine what a sacred text is. He arranges his considerations around four points.

The first is what is traditionally and historically regarded as a sacred text. The second point relates to the question as to what the believing readers of a text regard as the traits or characteristics of sacredness. Thirdly he looks at the importance of the context and how it determines sacredness, coupled to what the conditions are that determine sacredness. Finally, he raises the problem of sacredness from the discourse of contemporary literary-philosophy referring primarily to the function and reality of sacred texts in our contemporary scientifically orientated society.⁴³

I would like to examine these points in greater detail with Detweiler. It is interesting that he refers primarily to readers of texts and not users, as sacredness inevitably leads to a function for that text which is not dependant on the literary ability of the believer. This is a particularly pertinent reality in communities of the oppressed where educational malnutrition has been systematically implemented by the oppressors.

According to Detweiler, texts gradually become sacred. This process is profoundly influenced by certain powerful individuals in a community. The community eventually reaches the stage where the text is regarded as sacred. Sacredness therefore develops through historical processes. As Detweiler says:

"Texts become sacred because someone (or ones) manages to imbue them with an aura of divine

authority, but conversely, their divine authority is accepted by the community because they have been persuaded that the text is 'sacred'."⁴⁴

The point of importance for our argument is that the community is intrinsically part of the sacredness. The sacredness of a text does not exist in the text itself but through its interaction with the community. The community's understanding and attitude towards the text needs to receive far more critical attention by those who deal with the text or interpret it on behalf of the community.

Concerning the characteristics of a sacred text, seven are identified.⁴⁵ These are that they are understood to be inspired by divine authority. This element of divine authority is either attributed by the community or it is claimed by the author of the text. The claims would naturally influence the communities' perception.

The second trait is that they contain a message which would not be understood under normal circumstances. It therefore reveals a message from the divine source. This is close to the third characteristic, that sacred texts are encoded, and cannot be understood outside of the believing community. It is furthermore an expression of the fact that the divine is beyond normal human perception and it thus gives superior status and greatness to the divine. It is important that the community therefore regards the text itself as part of the divine and experiences it as part of the divine essence.

Sacred texts need a specialized person to interpret them. It is therefore not simply accessible to everybody as the divine empowers certain individuals to impart the secrets of the text. A fifth trait is that a sacred text transforms by connecting believers to the divine.⁴⁶

The penultimate characteristic is that it is central to the ritual and cultic life of the community. It provides the basis of religious ritual. The last is that it is understood to evoke the presence of the divine. This means that the text is the mode of transport for the divine.

These characteristics are enough evidence of what Biblical scholars are up against when they deal with the Bible. To develop academically sound methodologies is one issue, but to make them meaningful in the lives of believers is another. In South Africa, it is generally understood that the transformation of society must take place through the efforts of the oppressed and their allies. The role of the Bible in those sectors where it is regarded as sacred must be a critical issue and it must clearly address the limitations of that community.

The question of context and conditions which determine the sacredness of a text is inextricably linked to the readers' status as either believer or non-believer. This point is made by Detweiler in the following way:

"...a believer will expect the sacred text to evince the seven traits I discussed, whereas the non-believer will anticipate only one of those traits namely that the text will probably be 'hidden' or 'difficult'..."⁴⁷

Finally, even though for a modern interpreter, the text may not be regarded as sacred, it is often placed in a position of privilege by the interpreter. The point is that ultimately the mere reality of interpretation creates a sacred text and the fact of the existence of sacred texts demands interpretation.⁴⁸

Taking into consideration the valuable contribution of Detweiler, the challenge is for Biblical scholars to develop a greater awareness of the dynamics concerning the attitudes of Christians towards the Bible.

This challenge needs to be taken up by those who are pastorally involved in the lives of the communities which need liberation. The Bible is regarded as a sacred text in many communities and this, amongst other reasons, is so because of the need for the victims of oppression to develop crutches which enable them to survive. Biblical hermeneutics must be sensitive not to destroy these crutches but to transform them into tools of liberation. This is the challenge as we seek to liberate the Bible itself so that it can become a companion rather than a tyrant, as we seek to appropriate the liberatory hermeneutics offered by Biblical scholars as they contribute to the struggle for liberation.

CHAPTER 3

3. THE BIBLE IN COMMUNITIES OF THE OPPRESSED

This section will examine the models presented in Latin American Liberation theology and in Black Theology. Liberation theologians have made a critical contribution in the area of the call for a paradigm shift in methods of biblical interpretation. They have made biblical scholarship acutely aware of the relationship between praxis and theory.

South African scholars have interpreted and developed their own methods of biblical interpretation. Black theology has made its own contribution and we will critically evaluate this field and then sketch a scenario of the dynamics surrounding the biblical interpretation of communities of the oppressed.

3.1 LIBERATION THEOLOGY MODELS

The contribution of the Brazilian priest, Father Carlos Mesters, cannot be ignored when the issue concerns the appropriation of the Bible by the ordinary people. He identifies three basic situations in which the Bible is studied.⁴⁹

Firstly he sees a group of people who are involved in a discussion for no other reason but to discuss the Bible. Secondly, a group meets together to discuss and talk about the

Bible, but this time they do it as a community. Thirdly, and the situation favoured by Mesters, involves a community who have come together to study the Bible but who do this from the basis of concrete reality and their own particular context.⁵⁰

This is crucial in Mesters' understanding of the Bible, as he understands its role to be in the hands of the oppressed. The Bible is to be understood in conjunction with the concrete reality facing the interpreting community. This reality is the added dimension to biblical interpretation, together with the Bible itself and the community which provides the context. The Bible is incomplete as the word of God, and Mesters sees it as follows:

"The word of God is within reality and it can be discovered there with the help of the Bible. When one of the three elements is missing, however, interpretation of the Bible makes no progress and enters into crisis. The Bible loses its function."⁵¹

This is what is argued continuously, and this is what has to be addressed amongst Christians in our South African communities of the oppressed. The challenge of this thesis is presented by the challenge to free the oppressed who are Christians, in adopting the third situation of reading the Bible from an understanding of the concrete reality of the forces which organize their oppression and the avenues of liberation.

From numerous examples in Latin America, it becomes clear that the oppressed, if given the opportunity, are anxious to talk

about their real life situations. This is an important first step as all interpreters of the Bible interpret it from a particular context and they are influenced by given social, political, economic and psychological forces.

Mesters further identifies certain obstacles in the process of biblical interpretation which starts with the actual concrete situation in which people find themselves. These obstacles will help us to address the problem of the distance between liberatory hermeneutics and the developed methodologies on the one hand and communities of the oppressed in South Africa on the other.

The most basic issue is levels of literacy and another is 'slavish literalism'⁵². Another way of identifying the problem is by calling it fundamentalism or identifying it as the Confessional method of biblical interpretation. This happens when the Bible is approached as an object in itself, standing wholly outside of our field of experience and completely dissociated from it. It is important for us to note at this point that a battle exists for the Bible. This battle is waged from the basis of ideological frameworks. It is here where it does not make much sense to simply say that the Bible is liberatory, as the oppressors use it effectively as a tool of oppression. In the South African situation it was and continues to be used (even though less frequently) as the basic justification for Apartheid. A first step is however for people to be liberated from placing the Bible beyond criticism. I J Mosala's⁵³ contribution is that the Bible does in fact reflect

these ideological tensions and does reflect the interests of the powerful in society. If this is taken into account, the obstacle of 'slavish literalism' becomes a critical problem in the whole debate.

A third obstacle is what Mesters regards as the conception of time. He sees a perception of time which is unable to fathom what is the beginning and what is the end. He puts this down to a cultural problem. Another obstacle, the fourth, is the fact that people depend too heavily on experts of biblical exegesis.⁵⁴ It is interesting that when Detweiler seeks to develop the characteristics of a sacred text, that he lists one of them as the need for a specialized interpreter. We will see, in a later section of this thesis, how certain denominational traditions actually enforce this perception of a learned exegete. Given the challenge in South African society to transform and liberate, it is important to see the need to free people to enable them to gain confidence in their own abilities.

The fifth obstacle identified by Mesters in the mentioned article, relates to the impatience of traditionally accepted Biblical exegetes or pastors who have a commitment to liberatory interpretations of the Bible. He raises the issue of pastoral strategy and its role in exposing people to new methods of biblical interpretation. This refers to the absence of a pastoral element in the attitude of some Biblical scholars. When Mosala criticizes the hermeneutics of Desmond Tutu and Alan Boesak,⁵⁵ he does it as an academic and a Christian leader who

actively campaigns against the system of oppression in South Africa. When Tutu and Boesak address the people, they reflect their pastoral interests in the same way as Mosala reflects his academic interests. Where Mosala needs careful consideration, is when he argues that such a hermeneutical position does not help people to discover their own contribution to biblical interpretation. One could also hardly expect two pastoral leaders to reflect what Mesters sees as a long, delicate and serious process of changing people's oppressive perceptions of the Bible in a speech or sermon to people from a public platform. It is this pastoral element which Mosala and others miss in their critique which remains legitimate and epic in the academic realm, and enters the debate at a very basic and methodological level, based on the demand for what Mosala calls an epistemological break.

The issue of concern nevertheless remains the demand for sensitivity to where the people are. While most exponents of liberatory methodologies of biblical interpretation reflect primarily on the needs of the people, this obstacle raises the need to focus as acutely on the limitations of those identified by Mesters, people who need to be incorporated into the process of liberatory interpretations. The Bible has been identified as a crutch for survival earlier on in this thesis. In addressing this issue, Biblical scholars must always bear in mind that the targets are victims of oppression and therefore those crutches need transformation not destruction. Mesters puts it in the following way:

"Meddling with the faith of the people is very serious business. You must have deep respect and a delicate touch. You must try to feel as they would and intuit their possible reaction to what you are going to say. The people should be allowed to grow from the soil of their own faith and their own character. They should not be dragged along by our aggressive questions."⁵⁶

A sixth obstacle according to Mesters, relates to the issue of language and the difficulties raised by translation. This is a reality raised by the distance of time that exists between us and the actual literal biblical text. The difference in expression creates a feeling of separation from the Bible itself. At the same time, the Bible has a literal and poetic ethos of itself which needs to be preserved.⁵⁷

The last obstacle raised in this contribution by Mesters, is the reality of antagonism between biblical fundamentalists and those who have been influenced by other doctrinal, worship and liturgical traditions.⁵⁸ This issue is as relevant to the South African society and will receive further attention when we focus on the dynamics surrounding the biblical interpretation of ordinary Christians in South African society.

The Latin American situation provides the most poignant example of how attempts have been and continue to be made in order to bring the Bible closer to the people. Here, Biblical scholars have produced Bible Study guides for use in the Base Communities. These Bible Study courses are a fine example of how biblical scholars have tuned themselves into the struggles of the

oppressed in order to produce liberatory Biblical encounters.

A fine example would be the efforts of Carlos Mesters himself who regularly engages in a praxis which informs his theory. In the introduction to one of his series of booklets⁵⁹ he addresses the shift in biblical scholarship. From a keen interest to have a deeper knowledge of what the Bible actually meant when it was originally written, interest has gradually shifted to what the Bible means to the people of today. While clear appreciation is shown for the efforts to ascertain the meaning of the text as it was intended by the author, he also sees the dangerous situation it has brought about, i.e. a Bible removed from the ordinary users. The situation is expressed as follows in the foreword to the Mester series by Fr Paul Decock.

"...,since the 'scientific' or 'critical' exegesis focused almost exclusively on the 'original' meanings of the Bible people got the impression that one could not really discover the meaning of the Bible unless one was a scholar, specialized in the history of Biblical times, the intricacies of the origins of the Biblical books, and trained in the various methods of exegesis. It made ordinary people believe that they would not really discover the meaning of the Bible for themselves, but that they had to be told by the specialists. Furthermore, the almost exclusive emphasis on the meaning of the author, who lived so long ago in such different circumstances, made the meaning of the Bible very remote, concerned with situations and issues of many, many centuries ago. This 'historical' or 'scientific' exegesis took the Bible out of the hands of ordinary believers and drew the attention away from the meaning of the Bible for us now."⁶⁰

This issue is not to decry the crucial importance of a literal or historical study of the Bible, but to highlight the demand

for the Bible to become a close companion of the people, enabling them to enter into a dialogical and dialectical relationship with the Bible.

Another example of an attempt to enable people to study the Bible from the context of the realities of their situation, is the efforts of Ernesto Cardenal in the remote archipelago of Solentiname.⁶¹ His point of departure is that the Bible was produced by the poor, and for the poor, and can therefore be best understood by people who live in the same way. He puts it in this way:

"The commentaries of the campesinos⁶² are usually of greater profundity than that of many theologians, but of simplicity like that of the Gospel itself. This is not surprising: The Gospel, or "Good News" (to the poor), was written for them, and by people like them."⁶³

This position needs to be placed under closer scrutiny in the light of the evidence and arguments by those who regard the Bible as a book which projects the ideological struggles of the day and which cannot be regarded as an interclass document. It is however, preferable for us to first examine some South African liberatory models of biblical interpretation.

The examples mentioned above are a fine example of theory which is informed by praxis and how Biblical scholarship should get its tools from the communities of the oppressed and serve these communities in their struggles for liberation.

3.2 SOUTH AFRICAN LIBERATORY MODELS

3.2.1 BLACK THEOLOGY

Black theology, in its response to the demands of Black Consciousness in the seventies, produced its own scholars who sought to interpret the Bible from a Black perspective. These efforts can inevitably be traced to the scholars of Black theology in America.

One of the most articulate exegetes within the ranks of Black theology was undoubtedly Alan Boesak, and his work entitled "Farewell to Innocence", made a major contribution to the incredible development of Black theology as a critical and inquiring force in South Africa. The list of notable and sound Black exegetes is a long one today. In their search to make the Bible relevant to the Black and oppressed people of South Africa, they, however, floundered on the level of academia, often impressing the radical among the oppressed with their eloquent and scholarly exegeses of the Bible, but ultimately failing to actively engage the oppressed in this liberatory method of biblical interpretation.

The problem is addressed by Itumeleng Mosala when he states that:

"It is incontestable that, although black theology has made a vital contribution to the black struggle,

it has not yet, as a weapon of theory, become the property of the struggling black masses. To this extent it is a theory that has not yet become a material force, because it has not gripped the masses. It has served its purpose well as a weapon of criticism against white theology and white society. That activity, however does not replace criticism of the weapon itself. Part of the reason black theology has not become the property of the toiling masses may lie in the class positions and class commitments of its proponents."⁶⁴

This critique of the contribution of Black theology is the latest contribution by a Black South African Biblical scholar. It reflects quite clearly, the distance between the scholar and the community of the oppressed, without really entering into practical means of making these methods more accessible to the oppressed. It goes only so far as to identify the problem of the class captivity of Biblical scholars.

More, however, needs to be said, and greater credit given, to recent Black Biblical scholars who have introduced new and exciting models of textual analysis. Welile Mazamisa has made a valuable contribution to Biblical scholarship in his study on Luke 10.25-37 which he refers to as an exegetical-hermeneutical study.⁶⁵ This again reflects the need for a greater level of dialogue and camaraderie between the scholars from the ranks of the oppressed and the communities whose interests they purport to serve.

Mazamisa highlights the relationship between the text, history and the receptor. There are, according to him, a number of implicit and explicit factors which influence the meaning that

a text has to the receptor. He identifies some of these issues as the receptor's social location as well as the purpose and expectation of the receptor. The study primarily highlights the need to have as close as possible an understanding of the historical and literal conditions surrounding the production of a text.⁶⁶

It is this kind of method which could become a useful and valuable tool in the hands of the oppressed, if they can be freed to accept such a critical approach to the Bible. The methods are there and they are exciting and filled with revolutionary promise, but the dynamics which hold the communities of the oppressed, and the Bible, in captivity need to be unravelled and understood.

Let us return to Mosala's critique, for essentially he touches the real reason for the captivity of the Bible in South Africa when he questions the perception that the Bible is the divinely inspired Word of God.⁶⁷ The question is how to address this issue with those communities who use the Bible as a crutch in a situation of severe oppression and deprivation. If one could encourage the much desired dialogical relationship between the Bible and Christians in our communities of the oppressed without harsh criticism, it is highly desirable. What is clearly needed is for the Bible to be freed from the unfair expectations placed upon it by many who regard it as the absolute Word of God, so that it can become a weapon and encouragement for liberation amongst many others. The people ultimately have to determine

their own destiny under the guidance of God, with the knowledge that God's guidance is not restricted to the pages of the Bible, but is primarily revealed through the realities of the concrete situations which influence their lives.

Mosala summarizes his problem with the perception of the Bible as the Word of God in the following way.

"Paradoxically, black theology's notion of the Bible as the Word of God carries the implication that there is such a thing as a nonideological appropriation of Scripture. Black theologians condemn white people's view of God and Jesus Christ as apolitical, that is, above ideologies, on the one hand; but they maintain a view of Scripture as the absolute, nonideological Word of God that can be made ideological only by being applied to the situation of oppression, on the other hand."⁶⁸

This criticism is valid insofar as it treats the Bible as an object for academic scrutiny. It does not take seriously enough the role which the Bible plays as a symbol of Christianity and faith. This thesis tried to address this issue in the section concerning Detweiler's contribution on sacred texts and will raise the issue again when the dynamics surrounding the life of communities of the oppressed, who are Christian, is examined.

Mosala takes issue with attempts to claim the whole of the Bible as a liberatory document.⁶⁹ This presupposes a central message of divine inspiration and does not take into account the class struggles within the communities who produced the biblical texts. Ultimately, our ideological frameworks determine the way in which we interpret and understand biblical passages. In the same way,

the Bible reflects the different ideological frameworks of its producers.

It is at this point where Liberation theologians and Black theologians alike are challenged by Mosala. Cardenal and Mesters, together with Tutu, Boesak, Gqubule, Mgojo are challenged in their perceptions of the Bible.⁷⁰ The question remains however as to whether Mosala is taking up issue with scholars or with pastors, for I believe that whatever role is dominant, i.e. scholar or pastor, should and will ultimately determine the tone and flavour of the hermeneutics. This, together with the circumstances and the audience, as well as the intention, will ultimately determine the hermeneutics of the exegete.

Mosala therefore appears to deliver his critique from a position of academic predominance. What he says is however relevant and should form the basis of one's exegetical engagement. This engagement must however be balanced by a clear pastoral commitment and strategy which will take into account the sensitivity of another person's faith. The meaningfulness of relationships are very difficult to be determined by outsiders and the same applies to a relationship with what is essentially a religious and faith symbol like the Bible.

Black theology has struggled against white dominance in theology. This is the context which demanded its response. But here we have a challenge to subconscious, or perhaps, simply traditional

perceptions which none of us in the Christian faith should feel obliged to defend. Having made their contribution in the struggle, scholars now need to weigh their contributions against the demands for the positive transformation of South African society, and what contribution biblical scholarship can make towards the empowerment of the oppressed, as they are involved in processes of education, to participate in the legitimate political process of governing this country.

The same criticism which Mosala raises regarding the inability of Black theology to be owned by the masses,⁷¹ is also relevant to his contribution, as outstanding as it is. We do, however, need to first look at the pastoral concerns expressed by those Black theologians who face Mosala's critique, as this will help us in attempting to find a way of opening the oppressed to grow from an oppressive relationship with the Bible to a more open and meaningful relationship.

What did Black theology actually try to address and why did it really fail to enter into the communities of the oppressed? Lebimang Sebidi has the following to say about the task of Black theology:

"As long as the Black people in this country suffer a double bondage: racial oppression and economic exploitation, the task of Black Theology will always be double pronged. Racial capitalism is the name of the game. This is the sin that Black Theology wants to uncover and eradicate in God's own name. The term 'Black' must perforce remain prefixed to theology because for the past 117 years 'blackness' in this country has been the symbol of economic, class exploitation."⁷²

This perception of Black theology, in 1984, reflects the position that Black theology, per se, can liberate the people, and the assumption is clearly that the Black people could in fact appropriate what Black theology had to offer. This position does not deal with the issue that a fundamental element in the process of liberation is that the people should themselves engineer and be passionately involved in this process. If there would be any role for Black theology, it would have to be as a weapon of the oppressed.

This demand for transformation has however not been a silent issue in Black theology in the sense that it has not been addressed, for Simon Maimela addresses the issue as follows:

"In view of the fact that the world in its process of making is open to human intervention, planning and transformation, Black Theology of liberation finds it necessary to call and inspire men and women to engage themselves in a struggle to change the social realities of this oppressive and life-denying world so that they, together with God, can shape the world into what was intended by their Creator. Furthermore, in order to underline the meaningfulness of human involvement in the ongoing dynamics of creativity, shaping, and transforming the world towards its intended goal and completion, Black Theology of liberation calls men and women to play their part and to be on the cutting edge of human liberation from all forms of social and spiritual oppression, thus becoming partners with their Creator in the refashioning of this unjust world into one in which they will at last find fulfilment...., Liberation theology teaches people that social structures and interpersonal relationships are not fated to be eternally oppressive and destructive. Rather they are alterable for the better because all historical structures are neither perfect nor can they claim to fully encapsulate the life giving and life prompting will of God. Accordingly, it remains human responsibility to join hands with God in order to build up, nurture and transform all social structures and institutions so that

they may serve human needs better and better."⁷³

This spirit of active human engagement in the transformation of South African society is the key issue. It needs however to be transported into the hands and minds of the communities of the oppressed. An active engagement in the transformation of society inevitably means the transformation of the people who have actively engaged themselves. This excitingly relevant position of Maimela and others has however remained a soundly theoretical one. There are issues which prevent the oppressed to appropriate their faith in a transforming way. By remaining subservient to it, they remain subservient to interpretations of it, as the Christian faith and the Bible of which it is such a powerful symbol is not nonideological, as Mosala argues, it is understood, very clearly, within the confines of the ideological position of the interpreter. The reality for South African society, and elsewhere, is that the interpreters have traditionally been the Westernized powerful colonialist elite and the eloquent, scholarly privileged. It remains our task to enable the oppressed to enter into critical dialogue with their faith and for our purposes in this thesis, particularly the Bible. They must learn to measure the efficacy of their interpretations against its contribution to the transformation of society.

3.2.2. PROPHETIC THEOLOGY

The production of the Kairos document in 1986 marked an exciting new tendency in theology, particularly in the claim that what was

eventually produced, was the result of a process of consultation from where the people are. It is this process which, according to its claim, makes it different from theological contributions which is developed from the basis of theology as an academic discipline. The Kairos Document's critique on Church and State theologies is an extremely useful contribution in showing how accepted biblical concepts portray a particular ideological framework and how, if it is accepted uncritically, can seriously threaten and retard the people's struggle for liberation and transformation.

While the situation and process indicate a theology of the people by the people, the Kairos document itself has existed as an extremely useful theological contribution but has in reality not been claimed by the poor and oppressed. John de Gruchy writes the following concerning Prophetic theology:

"While Prophetic Theology is Biblical in intent, its methodology is that of the hermeneutical circle whereby Scripture is read in relation to social analysis and from the perspective of the poor, the oppressed and the disadvantaged."⁴

While this perspective of the poor, the oppressed and the disadvantaged remains the crucial issue as far as a hermeneutical starting point is concerned, it will remain an academic interest as long as 'the poor, the oppressed and the disadvantaged' are unable to appropriate the new approach presented and own it for themselves.

De Gruchy names Albert Nolan's incredibly informative contribution called 'God in South Africa' as a 'significant expression of Prophetic Theology'.⁷⁵ This is indeed an epic contribution and an example of a theology informed by a thorough analysis of the forces at work in South African society today. The book does not however encourage the oppressed to identify the struggle which they are involved in, in the Bible itself. Instead, they are encouraged to believe that the Bible is entirely on their side. Nolan displays this position by making a searching analysis of the need by European Christians to have their guilt removed, and how they read the Bible from this perspective, which is basically and in reality what all Christians do, i.e. read the Bible from their own perspective, and concludes that....

"This kind of 'Christianity' is not biblical."⁷⁶

What the oppressed really need to be educated about, is that the Bible does in fact reflect the kind of situation which will satisfy the European Christian desire to know that their guilt has been taken away. The battle is in reality not on whose side the Bible is, as people invariably develop their own canons within the canon of Scripture, but the battle is to understand the ideological and political forces, together with the social and economic conditions, which maintain the system of oppression.

This is the point where Mosala's contribution needs to be taken seriously. To encourage the oppressed that the Bible (as a

whole) is on their side, runs the risk of once again pacifying them with the perception that all is well as God is on their side, while one is acutely aware of the desire of theologians like Nolan, to encourage the full implementation of all human resources to liberate and transform. This risk emanates from the kind of oppressive relationship which people have with the Bible, and their identifying it as the absolute Word of God. It is this image of the Bible which, I believe, needs sensitive correction by those with a clear pastoral concern and approach.

Continuously, theologians are busy, through praxis and theory, to incorporate different theologies of liberation in their thinking. The basic issue which, according to de Gruchy, binds the theologies together is a "...shared commitment to the struggle against Apartheid."⁷⁷ This basis is further influenced by a whole host of other issues, notably the particular tradition from which the theologian comes. At the same time, it is simplistic to believe that we are all slaves to whatever forces are operative in our lives. Most of us who seek to make the Bible relevant to our situation, have not seen the need to make the epistemological break called for by Mosala.

We need to learn to accept that our ideological frameworks ultimately determine how we interpret the Bible. The Bible was produced in context and it is understood in context, as Albert Nolan writes:

"What is clear is that different historical circumstances give rise to different formulations

of what we call the gospel. In other words the gospel is, and has always been, contextual. The particular set of words or expressions that one may choose to use depends upon the language, culture, politics and needs of a particular time and place."⁷⁸

This is a critical perception in our understanding of the Bible. Biblical scholars have identified the limitations of a biblical interpretation which starts with the Bible as the absolute Word of God. The challenge is what the process will be by which this particular position will be brought to the ordinary users of the Bible.

3.3 FEMINIST THEOLOGY

Feminist theology has a critical contribution to make to the use of the Bible in communities of the oppressed. Feminist theologians, more than anybody else, have to struggle with a Bible which is loaded against the cause of women simply because of the nature of the stratification of society in the age which produced the Bible. Whereas most Liberation theologians have taken up the cause of the poor and whereas the reality is that few, if any, academically trained Liberation theologians (and this is not regarded as a contradiction in terms) are themselves poor, women, like Black theologians, personally suffer the humiliation of the oppression directed at them. Women, other than Blacks, have the situation where discrimination and oppression is literal in the Bible. This is what Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues:

"...the feminist theologian challenges not only the supposedly neutral and objective stance of the academic theologian, but she also must qualify the definition of the advocacy stance of liberation theology as 'option for the oppressed,'

Her involvement in liberation theology is not 'altruistic', but it is based on the acknowledgement and analysis of her own oppression as a woman in sexist, cultural, and theological institutions. Having acknowledged the dimensions of her own oppression, she can no longer advocate the value-neutral, detached stance of the academician. In other words, feminist theologians' experience of oppression is different from those of Latin American theologians, for instance, who often do not belong to the poor, but have made the cause of the oppressed their own."⁷⁹

Women, unlike other types of Liberation theologians, even if they move from one social class to another, continue to suffer oppression, worse still Black women, who suffer the triple oppression of racism, classism, and sexism.

Feminist theologians therefore have had to deal with the explicit, stark, direct biblical language of oppression against women. They have had to particularly make the point in the words of Fiorenza that.....

"While liberation theologians affirm the Bible as a weapon in the struggle of liberation, and they claim that the God of the Bible is a God of the oppressed, feminist writers since the inauguration of the women's movement in the last century have maintained, to the contrary, that the Bible and Christian theology are inherently sexist, and thereby destructive of women's consciousness."⁸⁰

This is a statement which is born from a particular experience, especially in the light of the fact that the experience clashes

with certain basically held beliefs and religious doctrinal presuppositions. The statement therefore first and foremost acknowledges a particular concrete reality, that, for Fiorenza, a basic and important symbol of faith is placed under critical scrutiny, and that she needs to interpret the symbol of faith from the situation of her own concrete situation and context.⁸¹ I do not believe, that this attempt of Fiorenza's should in any way be regarded as disloyalty towards the Bible, as she is being loyal to God's first gift to her, herself and her circumstances. Itumeleng Mosala takes up the same position as Fiorenza, but he changes the categories and replaces women's issues with the issues of the Black working class in South Africa.

Fiorenza goes further to reject the idea of a Woman's Bible as proposed by Cady Stanton.⁸² This proposal involves a woman's Bible which consists only of those biblical texts which deal with women and Fiorenza's problem is a methodological one. She writes:

"Although the idea of a Woman's Bible consisting only of the biblical texts of women must be rejected today on methodological grounds, biblical scholarship on the whole has proven accurate her contention that the Bible must be studied as a human work, and that biblical interpretation is influenced by the theological mindset and interests of the interpreter."⁸³

This is the position which raises many issues relating to the central role which the Bible has played, and continues to play in the lives of many Christians regarding its authority and role as 'the Book' in Christianity as a 'religion of the Book'. While

most Biblical scholars, and those who are qualified to sermonize (as distinct from those who 'bear testimony' and use certain Biblical passages), accept the human element in the formation of the Bible, they continue to adopt the position that the Bible is the absolute Word of God, not as a pastoral consideration per se, but as an uncritical faith response, which does not seriously take into consideration, as a hermeneutical starting point, the issues raised by Feminist theology as expounded by Fiorenza and other scholars like Mosala.

Within Feminist theology itself, there are scholars who find themselves in the position of accepting the Bible as the Word of God above all else and this remains a debate. The issue which is obviously raised here, is the one concerning the authority of the Bible and how far the Bible is therefore to be regarded as prescriptive to Christians.

Rosemary Radford Reuther addresses the role of experience in theological thinking and identifies experience as 'the starting point and the ending point of the hermeneutical circle'.⁸⁴ While underlying the importance of Scripture, she also regards the Bible as being a part of that experience:

"What have been called the objective sources of theology, Scripture and tradition, are themselves codified collective human experience."⁸⁵

This is an important understanding of experience which does take into consideration the fullest possible view of experience. She

defines experience in the following way:

"'Experience' includes experience of the divine, experience of oneself, and experience of the community and the world, in an interacting dialectic. Received symbols, formulas, and laws are either authenticated or not through their ability to illuminate and interpret experience."⁸⁶

This is a pastorally concerned and balanced perception of the problematic which faces Christians, and other religious persons, in their attempts to make sense out of the forces which oppress, and their relationship with their particular faith tradition. This is of particular importance in South Africa for Christians who have to face the reality of a faith which has been, and continues to be used, as a justification for oppression. The reality is of course that Christians, and religious people generally, experience their faith from the context of certain given and concrete circumstances which influence their lives.

Fiorenza addresses the obvious issue concerning the truth-content of the Bible under three points which are worth examining. Her contribution is based on the understanding that the biblical text, and history, include both 'oppressive traditions' which need to be rejected and 'liberatory traditions' which must be detected.⁸⁷

The first point is that it is accepted that critical evaluation and scientific analysis be applied to biblical texts. This is clear due to the reality of the different methods employed in biblical interpretation, and dealt with earlier in this thesis.

These different methods have all contributed towards a clearer understanding of the role of the Bible. There are those who interpret the Bible from a scholarly position, there are those who start by attempting to reconstruct the historical circumstances surrounding the text and there are those who argue that the canon is the Christian community and its experiences. The most challenging contribution is that the Bible in fact portrays different responses to the historical situation in which the biblical communities found themselves. The need was therefore, that certain criteria needed to be employed in order to gain greater insight into the different traditions and interests found in the Bible.

What emerged, was a greater emphasis on the role of experience and an acknowledgement that the Bible is interpreted not only on the basis of faith, tradition and reason, but also the experience of the interpreter. This experience is based on the fact that the experiences of those who actively participated in the process which produced the Bible, played a crucial role in the eventual message which was projected.

The challenge is to accept the Bible as a source amongst other sources, and that the Bible cannot be claimed as the absolute and total expression of God's word in and to the world. In this light, James Cone regards the Bible, together with other sources, notably our own political situation and experience, as the sources of theology.⁸⁸ The point is however sufficiently made, that the Bible as a specific source, does not constitute the

absolute word of God, but that God is involved with us and in the world through various different ways. Other sources would include worship, liturgical and general faith tradition and expressions. All these help us to a fuller understanding of our faith in God.

The second point is that experience, both personal and political, which grows from a situation of oppression and liberation, should provide the basis for deciding what constitutes appropriate biblical interpretation. Any hermeneutic must include critical evaluation in order to detect and reject 'biblical traditions and theologies that perpetuate violence, alienation, and oppression.'⁸⁹

If the agenda is the liberation of women, this is the canon or the norm or the measuring rod by which the liberatory traditions in the Bible are identified so that the Bible cannot continue to be used as a means of oppression. This is critical in understanding the reasons for the development of more liberatory hermeneutical positions in the interpretation of the Bible.

Essentially the issue is that we are dealing with a question of faith, and people attempting to respond to the reality of oppression and the ensuing struggle for liberation by applying the same criteria to faith symbols and objects insofar as these symbols and objects are used to maintain the oppression from which emancipation is sought. Fiorenza cites an example by stating:

"For instance, throughout the centuries Christian feminism has claimed Galatians 3:28 as its magna charta, while the patriarchal Church has used I Corinthians 14 or I Timothy 2 for the cultural and ecclesial oppression of women."⁹⁰

There are many other examples which can be used by Liberation theologies from within their different categories of oppression. A liberative tradition which exists despite the patriarchal nature of the society of the day is obviously a most valuable weapon in the struggle to liberate and transform.

In the third and final point she makes, she calls for the Bible to be understood not '...as archetype, but as prototype.'⁹¹ This calls for a paradigm shift in biblical interpretation. The element of critical approach is a key issue here, and expresses the view that this critical and scientific approach is further liberatory insofar as it must also create this approach in the community of the oppressed. Such a weapon (i.e. critical engagement) is a very valuable one in any community of oppressed people.

Biblical scholars are thus challenged to stand accountable for their position publicly.

"Scholars no longer can pretend that what they do is completely 'detached' from all political interests. Since we always interpret the Bible and Christian faith from a position within history, scholarly detachment and neutrality must be unmasked as a 'fiction' or 'false consciousness' that serves definite political interests."⁹²

The point at issue is what contribution the Bible or the faith tradition is making to either oppression or liberation, as the Bible contains support for both, and therefore, the ideological framework of the interpreter plays a key role.

The demand is therefore for a paradigm shift which is focused on a praxis of liberation. The Bible as a canon in itself must be read from the context of the canon which is the experience of the community itself.

Feminist theology awakens us once again to the continuous development of new methods of theologies and how these are inherent in the study of theology and that they will remain the major and most important task of theologians who serve the interests of the oppressed. The challenge remains, however, how to enable the oppressed to appropriate these liberatory insights and tools in the struggle for liberation and transformation.

Many women remain oppressed, for example, because they have not been freed to question the sexism in the Bible, as their relationship with the Bible as the absolute of Word of God, does not allow them to question it or to critically engage it. This is our task and challenge today.

Biblical scholars in their efforts to address the issues of racism, classism, sexism and other forms of oppressive discrimination, have tended to treat the Christian faith as a homogenous group influenced by the issue raised. Another

important factor in biblical interpretation and approaches towards the Bible is the influence of the different Christian traditions which can be identified. This particular question will form the basis of the following and concluding section of this thesis. The section will also introduce my major critique on biblical scholarship which serves the interests of communities of the oppressed and that is that the challenge to engage in liberative methods of biblical interpretation is essentially a pastoral concern which can only be aided by academics but can never solely be addressed on an academic level and as an academic issue alone.

The reason for this criticism is based on the position that the Bible must not be divorced from the community of believers. It's sacredness exists only in its relationship to that community, and if it is studied as an object apart from that community, the exercise almost becomes futile. This position cannot be effected by lip-service, as the essence of the dilemma is the commitment to the Bible as essentially a faith document by all biblical interpreters, be they academics or members of the communities of the oppressed.

The methods must become more than logical and scientifically realistic theories and enter into the centre of the lives of communities of the oppressed. This dilemma will also be addressed in the following section. We must accept that the method in itself is not liberatory, although it must be recognized as having the potential to become liberatory. It only

becomes liberatory when it is owned by the communities in their struggle for liberation and transformation.

CHAPTER 4

4. TRADITION AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

I am going to start this section by addressing the last point raised as an obstacle by Carlos Mesters as outlined earlier in this thesis. This obstacle refers to the divide between fundamentalism and other Christian tradition. This section is critical insofar as many Biblical scholars tend to treat Christianity as a homogenous unit, whereas the reality proves different.

All Christians in South Africa, and elsewhere, exercise their worship and faith in a particular tradition. One tradition may be older and more established than another, but there can be no sense in regarding the one expression of faith as being 'more traditional' than the other. We have to see all these different religious traditions as the expression of the same religious basis, namely Christianity. Perceptions of a 'more traditional' view has often led to belief that one faith expression is outdated and archaic in the negative sense of the word. One tradition may be more rigid than another, but all have their own traits and symbols by which they can be identified.

A sweeping survey of the dominant traditions within the Christian faith in South Africa is possible. Each tradition influences the

way in which its adherents understand and interpret the Bible. This is as important an element in biblical interpretation as is the socio-political experience of people. This kind of experience as a criterion alone presupposes one homogenous Christian religion. This is clearly not the case in South African society or elsewhere. If we are going to make headway in our attempts to understand the intricacies of biblical interpretation, we need to understand the nature and effect that this fragmentation has on the way in which people who are influenced by it, experience and approach the Bible. This is not an attempt to make a value judgement on this fragmentation, but simply an acknowledgement of it as an existing reality.

It is crucial for the different Christian traditions not to be the only issue involved in biblical interpretation as it, the class differences and social, political and economic forces should be studied in harmony in order to fully understand the dynamics which influence perceptions of the Bible.

4.1 THE ROLE OF CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

In an attempt to identify these different Christian traditions, we need to acknowledge that these are not conclusive categories and that there is a great deal of interplay amongst them. It is helpful insofar as it helps us to gauge its influence on biblical interpretation.

The major categories can be identified as the Roman Catholic, the

Protestant, the Reformed (Calvinist), the Pentecostal and the African Independent Church Christian traditions. There are denominations which hang in suspension between certain of the categories. The Anglican tradition for example, is to be identified somewhere between the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. The influence of the Charismatic Movement in the seventies also influenced people right across the spectrum. The reality is however, that if categorized in terms of the above delineation, it will be identified in the Pentecostal, A.I.C. traditions. However, as a movement rather than a denomination with actual formal affiliation, it spans the spectrum and has influenced the thinking of people in all the above mentioned traditions. It is however, for our purpose, in essence a Pentecostal tradition of biblical interpretation which is determined here.

The most established tradition would be the Roman Catholic tradition giving rise to the protestations of Martin Luther. These protestations gave rise to a process which resulted in the formation of various Protestant churches, for example, the Methodist, Lutherans, Congregationalists, Presbyterians etc. Within this period, the cries for reform by people like John Calvin, gave rise to the formation of the Reformed or Calvinist family of churches.⁹³

The important element here, is that the spirit was one of protest and reform. It was a protest against a tendency of rigidity within the Roman Catholic church at the time. The issue was how

to highlight dissent against certain practices within the Roman Catholic church.⁹⁴ This was done through the development of doctrines which could counter the offending doctrines. These counter-doctrines were developed around particular Biblical texts, as one of the issues was the fact that the tradition dominated the way in which the faith of people was expressed.

Here we need to point out that all of our Christian interpretations have always been understood to be informed by faith, tradition and reason. This became prominent particularly during the era of the Enlightenment and for many centuries, this was the dominant position of the church, a position which was later challenged by the rise of Pentecostalism which adopted the position that what was needed for faith, was revealed divinely and contained in the Bible as the absolute Word of God. The most important challenge however, came much later, when the importance of the experience of the receptor was highlighted by Liberation theology.

The particular tendency within these major traditions, i.e. Roman Catholic, Protestant and Reformed has primarily been a scholarly approach to the Bible.⁹⁵ Because of the key role played by doctrine and logic, theologians were professionally trained to deal with theological issues during an era when the Church absolutely dominated the thinking in society. This scholarly approach was also true for biblical interpretation. The focus was doctrine, dogmatic and correct teaching particularly as challenges to orthodoxy arose as heretical perceptions. The

general effect of this was that the Bible was removed from the laity and the primary contact which people had with the Bible was the exposition by the theologians and highly trained priests and ministers who were academically firmly developed.

Corrupt practices by a strong clerical class in the Roman Catholic church, who controlled the symbols and sacraments of the church and often halted people's access to it,⁹⁶ made Paul's references to the justification by faith and not works, particularly in the letter to the Romans,⁹⁷ a relevant basis for protest against the malpractices. It was therefore the spirit of protest which influenced the development of a doctrine and an interpretation of the Bible which today still forms the cornerstone of a particular Christian tradition. This is a striking example of how circumstances and differences of theological and social perceptions influenced the interpretation of the Bible. The Bible was used to support preconceived thoughts about certain unhappinesses and to give greater impetus to that position. The letter of James, for instance, refers to the fact that 'faith without works is dead',⁹⁸ yet this particular passage did not fit into the point that needed to be made. Biblical interpretation was influenced by a particular situation of conflict and there was therefore no trace of neutrality in this particular interpretation. Today, the doctrine of justification by faith alone is often perceived as an undeniable, 'purely' biblical doctrine, as if it did not develop from a particular context, and satisfied a particular need.

It is of interest that the Reformation was an appeal for a fuller participation by the laity and therefore a movement of anti-clericalism. This was essentially a protest against the dominance of particularly corrupt clergy. The Bible itself was dominated in this way. Owen Chadwick states:

"The Reformation appealed to the open Bible. The Reformers had desired and planned that the simplest labourer in the fields might be able to read it for himself."⁹⁹

This was part of the strategy for reform. It is, however, questionable whether this was done out of a true desire to make the Bible more accessible to the laity, or whether in fact, that mere attempt to make the Bible accessible in this way, was seen as a protest against the church authorities in itself. The entire period surrounding the 17th century was however dominated by this particular struggle.¹⁰⁰ Today, the evidence of the centrality of the pulpit, representing the Word of God, is evident in the architecture and lay-out of the Protestant and Reformed families of churches over and against the centrality of the altar, with the pulpit set to one side in the Roman Catholic churches. This is an indication as to how the Bible was used as a weapon of resistance against the emphasis on the sacraments as salvific power.

Ultimately, however, this scenario set the situation in which the Bible was interpreted, and the way in which it was used and approached, as an expression of opposition and protest. The

accusation that the Catholic Church authorities of the time neglected the Bible for the sake of tradition, led evermore to a belief that the Bible needed to be seen as the absolute word of God.

The Reformers were soon an organised structure themselves with their own academically well-equipped theologians. The way to counter the orthodox clerics, was to be equally, if not better educated. The end result was a situation, within these particular Christian traditions, where a scholarly approach to the Bible was adopted and this is generally true to this day. This scholarly approach started questioning beliefs concerning the continuation of miracles and other extraordinary events.

The beginning of the 20th century saw the rise of a new movement which sought to encourage a greater emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, as this had become a dormant issue in the established churches. This became known as the Pentecostal Movement with an emphasis on the works of the Holy Spirit and a reintroduction into Christianity of instances of baptism in the Holy Spirit and glossolalia as recorded particularly in the biblical book, the Acts of the Apostles. Great emphasis is placed on divine healing and some of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit. The movement led to a proliferation of small independent Pentecostal churches. The movement also permeated the orthodox churches and a particular revival was experienced in the 1960s.¹⁰¹

Biblical fundamentalism was a particularly strong characteristic

of this Christian tradition. It is a tradition which emphasises the joy of forgiveness over and against a general emphasis on the need for penitence and forgiveness in the Roman Catholic tradition. These differences of approach are also evident in the way in which the Bible or sections of the Bible is understood by the different traditions.

The general perception, that the Pentecostal tradition is more Biblicist than the Catholic tradition, is proven to be an oversimplification in the following example of attitudes towards the issue of divorce. The Catholic tradition, informed by its repentant-penitent-who-is-struggling-to-please-God attitude, takes the Bible quite literally in its ban on divorce and stringent refusal to remarry divorced persons, in line with Jesus' forbidding of divorce.¹⁰² The Pentecostal tradition, informed by its joyful-and-forgiven-sinner-whose-life-pleases-God attitude, permits remarriage on the basis of God's forgiveness and therefore ignores Jesus' quite clear forbidding of divorce. The ethos and particular circumstances surrounding a particular tradition, therefore influence people's attitude towards the Bible. The very people who will demand of women to cover their heads because "the Bible says so", ignores a direct command by Jesus that whoever remarries, commits adultery.

One interesting feature of these churches is that people have a very close relationship with the Bible. It is however not a normal and healthy relationship which assists in the development of the person as a social being. Here the Bible is experienced

quite disturbingly as a tyrant which dictates patterns of behaviour and demands an unquestioning and uncritical allegiance. This kind of relationship obviously does not assist in the development of the critical faculties of its adherents. It is a relationship which, on the whole, has been ushered in by an overt reliance on the Holy Spirit to make clear what the Bible actually means. This has been perpetuated by the general situation of clergy who are not academically well developed. A shift is however taking place and this particular type of relationship with the Bible is not limited to this tradition.

In many instances in the longer established churches, the scholarly approach of the clergy has placed a distance between the ordinary receptor and the Bible. These members of the longer established churches, despite, or because of, the scholarly approach, often live in the same oppressive relationship, this time however quite often inspired by an awe which places the Bible in a special place in the home where it remains to record the family tree or as a symbol of the people's respect for God and God's word.

Another important issue in Christian tradition is the proliferation of the African Independent Churches (A.I.C.). These churches arose mainly as an African expression of an African experience of Christianity. The elements of healing, belief in ancestors and herbal medicine are incorporated quite comfortably into Christianity. The member- and leadership are all Black and they are completely autonomous.¹⁰³ They have been

seen as a political response to a particular political situation by Martin West.¹⁰⁴

These churches in both the Ethiopian and Zionist expressions have always been examples of lively expression of their faith in worship (almost similar to the Pentecostal churches) and in contrast to the more staid, sombre and penitent mood in the longer established churches. The emphasis in these churches, as well as the Pentecostal churches, is particularly on worship, and the Bible fits into the worship as a symbol. The Bible enjoys the same close relationship, yet awesome reverence as in the Pentecostal churches.

The Bible however, because it is primarily a human production, reflects different perspectives as its multiplicity of authors addressed the issues of their day. In this way, the Bible contradicts itself as authors differed in the application of their faith. This position is seen as the Bible having its own corrective method. Nevertheless, because of the above made point, it is impossible for anybody to be totally obedient to everything which is written in the Bible.

Why do we not spend more time on these issues which surround the Bible as pastors who have been exposed to some degree of academic training concerning Biblical scholarship? Why are we so silent on critical issues of our faith? It is dishonesty to allow people to continuously believe in the infallibility of the Bible if all the sections of this thesis have proven that there is

simply no way in which the Bible can be seen as the absolute word of God. Given all the dynamics of the influence which our particular Christian traditions have on our interpretation of the Bible we must of necessity realize that all our knowledge of the Bible can only in the end be interpretation and we must furthermore accede that our interpretation, apart from being informed by our social and economic situation, is also informed by our faith tradition and influenced quite dramatically by the particular translator of the Bible and her/his interest and faith tradition.

We cannot allow oppressed people who are challenged to be on a pilgrimage of discovery of themselves who are in search of transforming their society, to remain chained in any compartment of their lives. It is not disloyalty to God, the Church or the Bible to seek to free it, and those who believe in it, so that it and they can play a more meaningful role in the process of transformation. The biblical authors, encapsulated by their faith, addressed the issues of their day. The issues of our day are liberation and transformation and God's activity in our world did not cease with the closing of the canon of Scripture. We need to wrestle with the forces at work in our concrete reality, encapsulated by our faith, and informed by the examples of the Bible.

The task of Christians is to become critical readers of the Bible, in order to free the Bible from being a party to oppression, by continuously assuming that it is neutral in any

way.

That kind of neutrality only means the acceptance of a dominant interpretation of the Bible. We need to, through a sensitive, delicate and pastoral process begin to develop a confidence in the Bible as our companion in our struggle for freedom and transformation. This can only really happen if we develop a confidence in our ability, as a community of the oppressed, to liberate ourselves.

Given the kind of aura surrounding the Bible, it is my contention that if we manage to develop in Christians a constructively critical attitude and approach to the Bible, we would have made a major contribution to the empowerment of the oppressed. The Bible and every other religious book must undergo this critical scrutiny, or be banished forever to a position of being no more than a symbol of faith.

A WAY FORWARD

The challenge is for the pastorally concerned leadership in the church to develop an approach to the Bible which is based on the evidence delivered by this and many other contributions. This approach must take into consideration that, in the light of the evidence which we have examined, the Bible cannot be regarded as the absolute Word of God. Yet, in our pastoral encounters with the people who have a close relationship with the Bible, we must allow our own perceptions to become secondary as we engage in an honest and committed process of pastoral strategy. We need to develop a pastorally concerned Biblical hermeneutics, based on a thoughtful and informed analysis of the forces which maintain oppression, and the forces which will liberate and transform.

There can be no doubt as to how much the Bible means to many in communities of the oppressed, not simply as a crutch to lean on, but also as a means of direction and courage. The Bible will not lose its meaning when the process of liberation has reached a certain point, as it remains a unique contribution in the life of the Christian community of faith, given all the struggles of the people's faith in God which are represented throughout its pages. As a contributor to more meaningful liturgical worship, its aura of holiness has much to add to the richness of the varied forms of Christian worship traditions.

When we are, however, dealing with communities of the oppressed, there are also other matters of great importance. These communities need to be freed from the slavery of uncritical acceptance. The acceptance of the Bible as a fundamental and primary element in Christianity is not the same as an uncritical acceptance of it as the ultimate and absolute Word of God as expressed in the following statement:

The Bible is none other than the voice of Him that sitteth on the throne. Every book of it, every chapter of it, every verse of it, every syllable of it, every letter of it, is the direct utterance of the Most High... faultless, unerring, supreme."¹⁰⁵

This claim, even though it has been expressed about a century ago, should not be made in relation to any religious book, although its spirit, in a sense, dominates the relationship which many religious people seem to have with their own religious books.

The challenge is to act in the interest of the oppressed communities in the movement towards liberation and transformation. It demands of people to start with none other than the life experience and limitations of the receptors in the whole scenario of biblical interpretation and reception. The Bible, as every other religious book, needs to be read, used and interpreted from as clear as possible an understanding of the life experience of the receptors.

The Bible needs to be presented to the people, couched in the dynamics which surround it and its origins, in order to effect a more meaningful relationship and appreciation of the role which it can play. This will not be an attack on the Bible, but a presentation of reality and a contribution to the empowerment of the oppressed as they are encouraged in the process of critical assessment. People need to feel and experience the excitement of knowledge relating to the living communities which feature in the process which resulted in the completed Bible.

The formation of the Canon of Scripture is not a shame to be hidden but an integral part of our Christian tradition. The findings of Biblical scholars must not be wished away by those who are pastorally involved in the lives of people, but these crucially important hermeneutical tools must be utilized in a caring and pastorally concerned way, not only as a means of a greater understanding of the Bible, but also in the empowerment of the oppressed.

The implementation of this kind of programme, whereby the oppressed are empowered through the liberatory methods developed and identified by Biblical scholars, does not demand the setting up of new structures. The weekly Bible studies could for instance include teaching concerning the dynamics surrounding the Bible instead of an over-concentration on the contents of the Bible.

Another point of importance would be a concentration on the

paradigm shift proposed by Paulo Freire.¹⁰⁶ This would mean a moving away from the 'banking' method whereby people are simply informed as to what is meant by certain biblical passages. People need to be encouraged to participate in the unravelling of the passages, by starting with their own life experiences, and identifying the nature of the forces which influence and direct their lives.

I would like to echo the point made by Carlos Mesters when he argues that the Bible must take second place to life itself.¹⁰⁷ This is, according to Mesters, the place where God wants it to be. According to Mesters, this is already happening in his community, and he puts it this way:

"...the common people are putting the Bible in its proper place, the place where God intended it to be. They are putting it in second place. Life takes first place! In so doing, the people are showing us the enormous importance of the Bible and, at the same time, its relative value - relative to life."¹⁰⁸

This message can and should however only be put across through dedicated engagement in the life and struggles of the communities of the oppressed, and in a spirit of pastorally concerned Bible studies in community. This pastoral concern must be sensitive both to the needs and the limitations of the community. These limitations may be illiteracy, ignorance, educational bankruptcy, subservience and many others.

These limitations also present a challenge to Biblical scholars

insofar as they tend to concentrate primarily on needs and not sufficiently on limitations. The oppressed will not be able to appropriate tools which are designed above their limitations. Methods which will be effective to them, will have to reflect the limitations as well as the needs of the oppressed.

Every study of the Bible is ultimately a pastoral exercise in the sense that it deals with the care of people. The Bible forms an integral part of the faith of Christian believers and we need to take full cognisance of the fact that the Bible does not only have readers but also users. It is time that pastorally involved Biblical students take the contribution of liberatory orientated Biblical scholars seriously and internalize it, in order to facilitate a deeper understanding amongst the oppressed, in their attempts to become more human.

What is needed in South Africa is a pastorally concerned Biblical hermeneutics. We need to start with the people in their needs and limitations, and not with the Bible. The Bible needs to be placed in its proper place as an element in the Christian tradition, which has played, and will continue to play, a crucial role in worship, prayer, liturgy and teaching. But this time, on the side of and in support of the oppressed and as a means of empowerment and not of subservience. Biblical scholars are challenged to approach their academic inquiries from an active engagement in the life of a community of faith. This should have as a result, a deeper sensitivity to the people's need for a religious symbol like the Bible.

The South African theological scene has seen the growth of various institutes which present these alternative forms of Bible Study. The work of the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) and the Theology Exchange Programme (TEP) are well-known and readily available. It does however remain a challenge to Bible study facilitators to introduce these contributions. They also deal with a new method and not only new content. The onus is therefore on these facilitators, to first avail themselves of the liberatory methods and then to enable the filtering through amidst the oppressed. Many presenters of Bible studies themselves remain trapped in a hermeneutics which accepts the absolute authority of the Bible as the absolute word of God, and carry this uncritical spirit into the midst of the ordinary users of the Bible.

The Church of the Province of Southern Africa (Anglican) Department of Theological Education ¹⁰⁹drew attention to a statement made by seminary staff calling for the following:

- "(a) focus on the process of learning rather than solely its content, so that we are able to produce mature women and men equipped effectively to address the realities of our context;
- (b) an integration of faith and life at every level, both individually and corporately, so that the church may better become a holistic, democratic community which embodies the values of the Kingdom;
- (c) leadership training in the wider church which is based on the political and social realities of the crisis, which encourages creative engagement with those realities, and which grows out of and feeds back into people's real experience."¹¹⁰

These thoughts need to be applied to Bible studies as well.

It is my contention that an academically developed method of biblical interpretation is only half a job done and that it is only a step in a process. Any activity concerning the Bible as an integral part of the Christian tradition, only finds its fulfilment when it settles into the community of faith, as it is here where the Bible originates from and will continue to find its greater meaning.

ENDNOTES

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43. ibid. p.214.
44. ibid. p.215.
45. ibid. p.218ff.
46. ibid. p.217.
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52. *ibid.* p.201.
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54. Mesters *op.cit.* p.202.
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57. *ibid.* p.204.
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